Feminist Pedagogies: The Textuality of the Racialized Body in the Feminist Classroom

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Abstract

This paper addresses two central questions: What are the challenges of practising feminist pedagogies in an increasingly market-driven and demanding educational climate? And how does a racialized instructor negotiate these challenges? These questions are examined from the perspective of a Black female professor who teaches Introduction to Women's Studies and Feminist Theory to first- and second-year students, respectively.

Résumé

Cet essai aborde deux questions centrales : quels sont les défis de pratiquer des pédagogies féministes au sein d'un climat éducatif de plus en plus exigeant et axé sur une économie de marché ? Et comment un instructeur « racialisé » négocie-t-il ces défis ? Nous examinons ces questions de la perspective d'un professeur femme de race noire qui enseigne des cours d'introduction aux études sur les femmes et à la théorie féministe à des étudiants de première et de deuxième année respectivement.

Introduction

In the two years I've taught Introduction to Women's Studies, at the end of each course at least one student poses the question: "How come I didn't know any of this before?" "This" is a reference to the socio-economic, sexual, cultural, and historical factors that organize gendered lives in domestic and transnational contexts. In short, "this" is a critical intervention into the Canadian educational enterprise, which routinely fails to adequately include women's complex personal and social worlds in the curriculum. The absence of women's studies courses in high schools means that few students entering university are versed in women's histories. They are not familiar with the extent to which the women's and other social justice movements profoundly changed, and continue to shape, the socio-political landscape, nor are they aware of the importance of feminist praxis. They know even less about the involvement of Aboriginal, First Nations, and racialized women, believing them to be largely absent from the women's liberation movement.

At the university where I teach, students must complete the Introduction to Women's Studies or Feminist Theory course in order to enroll in a women's studies module (i.e., minor, major, or specialization). Generally, the students who choose to carry on in women's studies do so because they are excited and challenged by its discourses. The students who take the second year Feminist Theory class I teach, for instance, often talk of having "fallen in love" with women's studies in the previous year. Within the institution, professors teaching women's studies courses successfully draw on feminist pedagogies to foster student interest and create a supportive learning environment. At the university more generally, a strong emphasis is placed on teaching, which is highly weighted in the granting of tenure. Effective pedagogical practices are increasingly paramount in a climate where student enrollment in some faculties fluctuates

year by year and where misconceptions about feminist studies and its relevance in a "post feminist" twenty-first century persist. In such a climate, professors are charged with designing innovative courses to attract and retain more students.

In this dynamic and fluid context, how does a racialized instructor negotiate feminist pedagogies as a political project in the classroom? And how are feminist pedagogies practised in this increasingly demanding educational climate? This analytical and reflective paper addresses these questions from the perspective of a Black female professor. The paper reviews my experiences of teaching Introduction to Women's Studies and Feminist Theory courses to first- and second-year students, respectively, at one of Canada's top-ranked universities. I draw on course materials, classroom dynamics, evaluations, and personal reflections to inform this examination. The article raises questions about feminist pedagogical practices when the textual body of the professor is racialized, when the "student body" is predominantly white, and when both have to teach and learn in an increasingly outcome-based and competitive educational environment. My reference to the body as text reflects the reality that the body is imbued with social meanings that are simultaneously written and read onto it. According to Sherry Shapiro, the "body in all its materiality is socially marked and identified as black, woman, handicapped, old, lower class, fat—as the language of the other" (1999, 55). Furthermore, Andrea Dworkin argues that the skin "…is the first clue to identity in a society (for instance, color in a racist society), and, in purely physical terms, the formal precondition for being human" (1987, 26). These descriptions are appropriate and relatable to reflecting the body as it is implicated in the racial politics of "doing" feminist pedagogies in the academy.

Theorizing Feminist Pedagogies

Feminist pedagogical approaches in women's studies inform reading selections, classroom dynamics, and the student/teacher relationship (Crabtree, Sapp and Licona 2009). They also interrogate hegemonic epistemological assumptions and teaching practices, and challenge the notion of teacher as authoritative voice in the classroom, advocating instead for multiple voices, supportive and inclusive learning environments, and lived experience as a valid form of knowledge. Henry Giroux argues that, "…pedagogy in the critical sense illuminates the relationship among knowledge, authority and power" (1994, 30). Feminist pedagogies are rooted in the women's liberation movement, which, like other civil and human rights movements, calls for critical analysis of knowledge production practices that alienate women, racialized, and other marginalized people from, and within, the academy. Furthermore, feminist pedagogies question positivist approaches to knowledge rooted in ideas of objectivity and patriarchal ideology. Indeed, a generation of feminist scholars has contested deeply entrenched institutional values that have long upheld the university as the domain of a privileged few (Bird 2002; Hill Collins 1998; Pierson and Cohen 1995; Smith 2004).

Feminist theories and pedagogical approaches have made significant cross-disciplinary inroads in the academy. Few university faculties and departments are unaffected by feminist praxis, particularly in the social sciences and the arts and humanities. The women's studies departments, centres, and institutes that exist today emerged, in part, from a symbiotic relationship between grassroots women's groups and the academy. And the discipline has striven to ensure that academic research on women stays connected to the everyday realities of women's lives. Although these links between the women's movement and the academy are not without tension, they remain of central importance to many feminist scholars and researchers (Mies 1991; Sagot 2009; Sprague 2006). Much-needed and timely conversations about the failures of women's studies to adequately reflect the racial diversity and various gendered identities of its student populations, and the need for stronger interdisciplinary collaborations are also taking place in the academy (Brown 1997; Romero 2000). These conversations are not new. In fact they tend to be re-visited with each new wave of feminism, but they give evidence of a commitment to examining the limits and possibilities of women's studies. However contentious these dialogic initiatives

may be, they are framed by a feminist politics that insists on the inclusive, critical, and liberatory value of education and classroom pedagogical practices.

Critical feminist pedagogies are most effective when they tap into students' interests and learning styles. Some examples of these are connecting with an instructor and classroom peers around shared perspectives, implicating the whole self in the learning process, raising questions that challenge deeply held views about the world and social problems, and fostering dialogues that continue beyond the classroom. In the Freirian (after Paulo Freire) tradition, these approaches have the potential for self-awareness, reflexivity, and consciousness-raising—an "engaged pedagogy" (hooks 1994), which cannot be measured solely by assigned grades. I have encountered students in my teaching career who may not have earned top marks, but who, nonetheless, spoke of the ways they grew and changed by being exposed to feminist knowledges. In my Feminist Theory course, for example, students conduct research using feminist theoretical and methodological practices that make the materials meaningful to them. One student, after reading Mohanty's article entitled "US Empire and the Project of Women's Studies: Stories of Citizenship, Complicity and Dissent," revealed that she planned to reconsider her decision to work abroad to "help others." This was not an indication of intellectual paralysis on her part, in light of Mohanty's critique of missionary proclivities. Rather, the student wanted to think more carefully about how she might address social injustice in Canada where she lives and plans to work. In this way, exposure to feminist theory and pedagogy can inspire new and meaningful understandings of the world.

Feminist Pedagogies: Negotiated and Contested

Feminist pedagogical approaches are constantly negotiated and contested, in that their meanings are contextual, and their effectiveness in reaching high numbers of students in the classroom unpredictable. The hallmarks of feminist pedagogies—multiplicity of voice, experiential epistemology, and shared power and authority in the classroom—mean that relationships and knowledges are continually negotiated and often challenged. Feminist pedagogies are impacted by tensions emanating from institutional requirements, student expectations, and the politics of location—that is, by the race, class, gender, dis/ability, and sexuality of classroom actors. The presence of these factors creates a space in which both vibrancy and friction can, and do, exist. There are a number of complex reasons for this, but for the purposes of the paper, I will focus on how the emphasis on feminist standpoint epistemologies, in which lived experience is taken as valid knowledge, creates ground where differences and disagreements can sprout. (It is, however, beyond the scope of this paper to fully address the theoretical debates and contested perspectives on feminist standpoint theory).

Epistemological standpoints are central to feminist praxis (Grasswick and Webb 2002; Pohlhaus 2002). As Elizabeth Comack points out, "A feminist standpoint is a socially produced position and developing a feminist knowledge about women's lives is a political enterprise" (1999, 291). Comack's observation highlights the connections between bodies and broader social movements in producing feminist knowledge. It points to the value of social experience as credible knowledge and a starting point for dialogue. In the classroom, the social locations of both teacher and students are implicated in the pedagogical process. Indeed, feminist theorizing and pedagogy interrogates objectivity in the knowledge production enterprise, arguing instead for "strong objectivity" that more closely uncovers the connections between social structures and personal locations. Referencing Sandra Harding, Pohlhaus argues that

> It is important…to emphasize that those exploited by a social system do not just happen to have more objective knowledge. Rather, it is only when they grapple with the social arrangement that exploits them and how this social arrangement informs knowledge that they can achieve a more objective standpoint. Under Harding's standard of strong objectivity, the standpoint developed from the contradictions growing out of the situations of the oppressed moves toward more objective knowledge. (2002, 285)

On the one hand, deftly handled, standpoint epistemologies about women's lives are useful for finding common themes, enlivening curriculum, and fostering collaborative learning. In my classroom, I invite all students to speak from the place of lived experience if they choose to do so. The purpose of this approach is to teach students how to theorize experiential knowledge in relation to the questions raised in the course readings. In this way, "experience" does not stand unexamined (Scott 1999) but is presented as a valid and effective ground from which to interrogate the social world. Such an approach provides a meaningful entry point into analyzing feminist theories and the debates within them. This is evident in how some students are able to use strong objectivity to examine personal aspects of their lives, making new connections between their locations and social arrangements and feminist theoretical understandings of the world.

On the other hand, the potential for classroom conflict and student disengagement is also embedded in standpoint epistemologies, particularly when feminist scholars utilize experiential knowledge as a pedagogical strategy. Newberry (2009) argues that

> To begin with, I suspect it is in part the discourses of feminist pedagogy that themselves create ripe conditions for conflict, specifically the manner in which some articulations of feminist pedagogy hinge on the centrality of experience in knowledge production, the importance of dialogue and voice, and the valorization of the personal. Put differently, feminist consciousness raising has made its way into the feminist classroom, and this is no unproblematic union. (2009, 248)

In the positivist tradition, experiential knowledge is associated with women, who are typically deemed unable to be "objective" and thus incapable of producing valid knowledge (Bhavnani 2004; Hawkesworth 2006). Feminist critiques rightly point out that such a tradition is deeply organized and rooted in misogyny (Beasley 1999). However, Newberry's argument warns that a wholesale adoption of the experiential subject is also potentially problematic. She raises important and difficult questions about what constitutes valid knowledge, who can credibly produce it, and what the most effective tools for eliciting it are.

These questions are brought to life in the classrooms where feminist teachers practise their craft. Encounters between teachers and students are shaped by in/visible and intersecting social locations. For example, the educational environment in which students learn and are socialized fosters a false sense of equality and colour blindness. Canadians are invested in the belief that theirs is a tolerant, inclusive, and intrinsically multicultural nation. This makes it difficult to have meaningful dialogue about the material effects of race, gender, class, sexuality, and dis/ability as they are embedded in, and organized by, what Dorothy Smith (1987) calls the relations of ruling. It is particularly difficult to theorize gendered and racialized lives using strong objectivity as such knowledge cannot be heard as "objective" to begin with. Ironically, a student's impatience with epistemologies that fall outside of hegemonic norms often exists comfortably alongside a deeply rooted identification as a progressive, egalitarian subject (Henry and Tator 2006; Dei et al. 2004). This presents challenges to feminist pedagogies that seek to validate experience because *different bodies* of knowledge are accorded less credibility than others (Casper and Moore 2009).

Faced with a cohort of students who are largely unfamiliar with a social justice or feminist framework, feminist pedagogies require nuanced articulations. As a Black feminist professor, I am keenly aware of both the opportunities and challenges of speaking from an experiential location in the classroom. For example, narratives that address gendered racism are likely to be heard with skepticism and silent thoughts of, "Of course *you* would say that," thus reinforcing the belief that race and racism are only problematic when racialized people make them so. Even when the subject of race is not at play, assumptions are made about the racialized body and the impossibility of its "objectivity." In this way, although it may not be raised in discussion, race remains represented in and by the body (Bryant and Warren 2002).

Students come to class with an invisible knapsack, to borrow a term from Peggy McIntosh (1990), and with ideas about

Black women that are informed by representations in popular culture. For example, images of Black women in music videos and talk shows propagate a number of negative stereotypes. Black women are rarely depicted in positions of power, and certainly not as academics. That educated Black women occupy academic spaces as faculty members is a new phenomenon for many university students. In addition, most students are unlikely to have been exposed to critical readings of race, class, gender, and sexuality, and the ways these locations organize women's lives. Given these challenges, how then do I, as a racialized female professor, problematize and negotiate experiential knowledge in the classroom? I find some guidance in the work of Felly Nkweto Simmonds who argues that

> Permanent sociological vigilance is the consequence of oppression, a consequence of the subtle and not so subtle racism that permeates academic institutions [in Britain]. For a Black academic this is one of the burdens that we carry, everyday. For this reason we cannot and must not remain disembodied theorists. To put it simply, we cannot write a sociology of the Black experience without revealing certain private information. (1999, 54)

However, Simmonds' suggestion is tricky because "Who and how to be as women is more complex for Black women than many other women" (Ladson-Billing 2009, 89). Black female bodies are scripted in ways that mark us as inferior and shape how we are visually scrutinized and read. Referencing Nourbese Philip, Katherine McKittrick argues that "the black woman is seen, rather than heard" and that her body is inscribed with the "texts of the events of the New World" such as enslavement and the discursive systems that justify its subordination (2006, 49). It is with these things in mind that I am careful, in the classroom, to distinguish between the disclosure of personal narratives that invite voyeurism, and the articulation of experiential knowledge that critiques structural inequalities from a feminist and/or sociological perspective. Not only is the latter a better pedagogical tool, it is useful for maintaining credibility that may otherwise be undermined because of the raced body in focus.

Despite this care on my part, the visibility of being a woman of African descent, and the discursive meanings attributed to this, remains of concern to some students. For example, in reading my evaluations for Introduction to Women's Studies at the end of the academic year, I was struck by two comments offered by two different students: "The only focus is on African women. Maybe make this more clear in course description" and "There is too much emphasis on black feminists and almost none on any other race." Reading these remarks led me to take a closer look at my syllabus, co-organized with a white colleague, who has been teaching the course for several years. My colleague notes that over the years, she has received similar complaints about too many readings that focus on the lives of Aboriginal and/or gay people. We each teach a different section of the course using the same materials and we collaborate closely on all aspects of the curriculum and its delivery. In a combined course package of 60 readings and video clips, 3 focused specifically on African women: Johnson-Odim (1991), McClelland (2008), and clips about women's resistance to female genital mutilation in Senegal; 6 articles were by African American scholars (Davis 1993; Hill Collins 2000; hooks 2000; hooks 1992; Truth 1972; Walker 1984), and 1 focused on gendered violence and structural adjustment programs in a fictional Jamaican setting (Harrison 1997). The course package also offered theoretical readings and short articles on the experiences of lesbians and gays, Aboriginal women in Canada, the social construction of gender, the realities of living with illness and disability, violence against women, feminized poverty, and different approaches to feminist theorizing. Many of the articles with a specific focus (e.g., disability, race, gender, sexuality or class) also addressed the intersectionality of these locations.

Cleary the course package covered a broad range of issues and perspectives. That, despite this, some students still had the impression it focused "only" on African women, and "*too much"* on Black women, raises a number of interesting questions: Which women's

lives are valid sources of knowledge? And who is the credible teacher? What does it mean to be a visibly Black teacher in a class-room where the students are predominantly white? If all of the readings were produced by white feminist scholars, would students com-plain that the course was *only* about white women? Do first year students, who also take courses in philosophy, for example, complain about the dominance of the white male philosophers who make up the canon? Some of the answers to these questions lie in elusive representation and lived realities of whiteness, a subject I turn to next.

Problematizing Whiteness

Whiteness is at once normal and in/visible, and these are hallmarks of its power (Babb 1998; Frankenberg 1993; Garner 2007; Kempf 2009). Indeed, "Whites must be seen to be white, yet whiteness as race resides in invisible properties and whiteness as power is maintained by being unseen" (Dyer 1997, 45). Course materials that take up themes of race and power, difference and whiteness, as critical courses in the social sciences and the arts and humanities often do, are suspect to students from the dominant group, as are the racialized, gendered, and sexualized bodies who teach them. Racialized women faculty, and Black women professors in particular, face challenges in universities and class-rooms because of the textual implications of their bodies (Bannerji 2000; Elabor-Idemudia 2001; Few, Piercy, and Stremmel 2007; Garcia and Van Soest 2000; Gregory 2000; Kishimoko and Mwangi 2009; Lee and Johnson-Bailey 2004; Rodriquez 2009; Wane 2007). Describing her experiences as a Black woman teaching courses on the literature of Black women writers and critics, Cheryl Johnson reflects that her body is framed by the social, cultural, and political contexts in which it is located and "by the students' gaze which is informed by their own socially constructed readings of race and gender and the relationship of these to literature" (1994, 411). The cultural meanings attributed to Black women's "social skin," in part determine access to social resources and power, both in the wider society and in the academy. Speaking succinctly to socially sanctioned practices that have kept Black women out of the academy, Hill Collins notes that "presence creates issues where absence has long been the norm" (1998, 105) when Black women show up at this site.

However, there are also other factors to consider in reviewing the social arrange-ments within which students and racialized professors are embedded. First, in my Intro-duction to Women's Studies class, of 97 students, approximately 75 per cent were white. While this is a high percentage, I cannot conclude that the students who wrote the evaluative comments referenced above were white. Rather, the comments raise a broader question: in an educational system that purports to value diversity and equity (as is the case in many school boards throughout Canada), how do schools prepare students to work with difference, to rupture "othering" practices, and to disrupt the normalcy and imagined superiority of whiteness? The need for these questions points to the persistence of whiteness as an ideology, and as a process that organizes social relations (Henry and Tator 2006). It highlights, for instance, the continued per-sistence of Eurocentric curriculum in Canadian schools and the absence of teachers who are black, or gay, or black and gay, or Asian, or Muslim or… (the reader is invited to fill in the blank).

Secondly, it is possible that the comment, "There is too much emphasis on black feminists and almost none on any other race," could be interpreted to mean concern for the absence of other racialized groups in the syllabus. While my colleague and I actively seek to design a course outline that is inclusive, this is an ongoing process that requires consistent review. In this regard, we seek out constructive feedback in our evaluations to improve and expand the readings offered in the course. Nonetheless, it is curious that the few course readings on Black/African women, and the presence of a Black/racialized professor, seems to create what TuSmith (2002) describes as "cognitive dissonance" among students who are, presumably, used to seeing White (male) professors and Euro-centric curriculums as the "normal" embodiment of valid knowledge.

Feminist Pedagogies and Authority

Drawing on Weber and Durkheim, Metz argued that "Authority is distinguished… by the superordinate's right to command and the subordinate's duty to obey" (1978, 6). This is, of course, antithetical to feminist pedagogies. Yet the feminist teacher must exercise some authority or risk losing credibility. Teachers are charged with upholding moral authority and promoting social cohesion (Campbell 2003). They represent the values of the educational institution and are expected to act as mentors and role models to students. Authority "is also a social construction constituted by interactions between teachers and students that are variable in their forms and meanings, and are shaped by contextual factors" (Pace and Hemmings 2007, 5). This definition more closely reflects how authority, shaped by feminist pedagogies, is exercised in women's studies.

Teachers are expected to facilitate and manage discussion rather than act as top down authority figures in the classroom. However, the contextuality of authority and the parameters of its negotiation are further shaped by race and gender. Black female professors often face challenges to their authority in the classroom, as such a space is, in part, a microcosm of the social inequalities in the wider society. Exercising authority is problematic for women of colour who practise feminist pedagogies because students are more likely to resist their position (Lee and Johnson-Bailey 2004). Racialized professors are thus placed in a precarious situation: required to show authority, but resisted for doing so because of who they are.

Moreover, the principles that inform authority in the feminist classroom can potentially run counter to students' expectations, which are often tied to market-driven understandings about the value of university degrees. Some students, in both small and large classes, do, in fact, want the professor to be the voice of authority in the classroom, even to the extent of minimizing or excluding other voices. They may view student discussion about the readings as disruptive and sometimes report having difficulties sorting out relevant information, especially in cases where they are accustomed to learning by rote. In an evaluation of my Introduction to Women's Studies course, for example, one student wrote, "Because it is supposed to be a lecture class, it seems like there should be more lecturing and teaching of concepts rather than relying solely on the students' thoughts and opinions. I'd rather hear the Professor's opinions than the students being taught. That should be saved for tutorials."

Similar sentiments were expressed in my Feminist Theory class, including multiple conversations with two students who always wanted to know what would be on the exam. In fact, a common question in almost every lecture in both classes was, "Will this be on the exam?" This question is indicative of students' anxiety about maintaining (high) academic averages and the belief that pedagogy must be designed to prepare students to function well on tests. The two students I mention above, highly motivated and hard-working, came to my office often throughout the semester to discuss assignment requirements and to solicit study advice. They explained that they were on track to a competitive business program and wanted to ensure that they would have the required final grades to secure their spots. They both found class discussions particularly irritating, reporting that open dialogue prevented them from focusing on what I had to say, thereby jeopardizing their chances of successful course completion.

As a feminist instructor, I value both pedagogical approaches: inviting students to find entry points to theoretical arguments through class dialogue, *and* giving them the tools to identify the salient points raised in class, which may appear on an exam. This balance is often best achieved by offering both lectures and space for classroom discussion. As an instructor, I find that inviting students to articulate their assessment of readings allows me to identify the ideas that are most challenging for students, to find ways to make them accessible, and to gauge the efficacy of chosen course materials. Many students find that readings on feminist theory are most effectively explicated by a pairing of classroom dialogue and an instructor-led mapping of the key arguments contained therein. However, as the quote above indicates, for some students, class discussions

and peer opinions disrupt the "authoritative voice" which typically holds the most power in the classroom. This tension presents challenges to feminist pedagogies wherein power is shared and multiple voices encouraged. Fostering multiplicity is still possible and desirable. However, this has to be navigated with an understanding of students' valid expectations and anxieties in a broader context, and with a critical awareness of how race shapes the exercising of authority. It is at these converging sites that the authority of the racialized body is contested, negotiated, and implemented in the course of doing feminist pedagogies.

The anxiety that frames the desire for an "authoritative voice" is, in part, related to the challenges facing undergraduate students, many of whom are unprepared for the rigours of university. In their book, *Ivory Tower Blues: A University System in Crisis*, Côté and Allahar (2007) persuasively argue that many of today's university students are disengaged from the learning process. This is due, to some extent, to the reality that many students, whom the authors refer to as reluctant intellectuals, do not want to be in university. Pressured by societal and parental beliefs that the academy presents the only path that will open professional doors to a middle class life, some students reluctantly pursue a university degree. In addition, the authors argue that high schools do not adequately challenge students to their academic potential, and many are pushed through the educational system because of grade inflation. Other critical scholars have sounded the alarm about the increasing marketization of educational pursuits (Apple 2001; Giroux 1999; Nocella et al. 2010). What might these realities mean for the feminist instructor and for feminist pedagogies when the students' main objectives are to get an excellent grade (that is, an A), and when many of them would prefer mini-lectures that reduce complex theories to short, testable sentences, preferably delivered by PowerPoint? How do these attitudes reconfigure how feminist pedagogies are practised in the classroom? These are challenging questions to be sure.

Conclusion

There are a number of contextual factors that shape feminist pedagogies including the social and political locations of the actors and who is perceived to be a legitimate holder of authority in the class-room. Feminist pedagogies implicate teachers and learners in the production of knowledge. As such, they have the potential to strengthen interdisciplinary connections and deepen learning. Indeed, the students in my Introduction to Women's Studies and Feminist Theory courses often talk about the ways in which feminist theory inspires them to bring critical perspectives to other courses such as political science, anthropology, and psychology. It also changes how students interact with their peers, intimate partners, and family members, as they begin to ask pertinent questions about social arrangements previously taken for granted. Yet, feminist pedagogies also have the potential to elicit friction and resistance, particularly in the academy where objective and quantifiable knowledge forms are highly valued. As a Black professor, negotiating feminist pedagogies presents additional challenges, especially in a predominantly Eurocentric university where curriculum is largely represented as "neutral." Yet, as an anti-racist, feminist educator, I value critical feminist pedagogies for their potential to teach students to think and act differently in the world. On a personal level, feminist pedagogies provide an opportunity for ongoing reflection about how the racialized and gendered body, as text, can trouble, deepen, and enrich feminist praxis.

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